

## *In Memoriam*

### Elsie M. Pinkston (1937–2012)

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Elsie May Pinkston, a colleague, mentor, and friend to many in the behavior analysis community, died on May 31, 2012, in Chicago, at age 74. Elsie was a true original—a down-home Kansas farm girl with sophisticated tastes, steely resolve, impish irreverence, brainy insight and creativity, and a huge heart. She also played a leading role in the expansion of behavior analysis from science into practice.

Elsie was born in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and raised in Altoona, Kansas, where she graduated from Altoona Rural High School in 1955. She earned undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees in psychology and child development from the University of Kansas. In 1973, Elsie joined the faculty of the University of Chicago

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Thanks to several of Elsie's friends and colleagues for sharing their recollections.

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School of Social Service Administration (SSA), where she taught for 29 years before retiring in 2002. Elsie was an innovator of behavioral clinical social work methods, particularly in the treatment of families. At the SSA, she cofounded the applied behavior analysis track and mentored numerous students who became leaders in social work training and practice. Elsie's research focused on the effectiveness of social work practice in areas such as parent training, care for the elderly, and child welfare. Her scholarly publications include many peer-reviewed articles and chapters and three books, *Care of the Elderly: A Family Approach*, *Effective Social Work Practice*, and *Environment and Behavior* (coedited with her late husband, Donald M. Baer).

Faculty and former students at the University of Chicago spoke movingly about the weight of Elsie's contributions to the school and the field of social work. Faculty member Tina Rzepnicki noted, "The legacy Elsie bestowed on the SSA is twofold: first, the ethical imperative to use empirical methods to inform social work practice at all levels, as well as a generosity of spirit, which made her a valued mentor to countless master's and doctoral students" (<http://ssa.uchicago.edu/elsie-pinkston-1937-2012>). Beyond teaching and research, Elsie was a vocal and passionate advocate for children's rights. Among the causes she championed was the promotion of ethical, informed investigation and response procedures to alleged sexual behaviors among youth in foster care. She served as adviser to the inspector

general's office of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and on civil rights groups representing the lost, forgotten, or downtrodden in society. A common theme in colleagues' reminiscences was Elsie's compassion as a friend, role model, and mentor. SSA colleague Stan McCracken recalled that Elsie talked unselfconsciously about the role of love when working with clients. Former student John Smagner credited Elsie with teaching him through example how to arrange his own environment, noting that Elsie made things happen, for herself and for other people, by her actions on behalf of people or issues she cared about.

Elsie was active in national and international professional organizations in social work, gerontology, and behavior analysis, where her advocacy role again was prominent. Several Association for Behavior Analysis (ABA) colleagues recalled Elsie's outspoken and, at times, confrontational protests in council meetings and convention sessions about the then male-dominated leadership of the organization. Dick Malott noted that, as the first woman elected to council in 1976, Elsie "kept the women's issues on the front burner, and she wouldn't let us good old boys sweep them under the carpet" (Malott, R. W., 2012. *Elsie Pinkston, Inside Behavior Analysis*, 4/2). She encouraged ABA to move its convention from Chicago when Illinois failed to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, supported opening up ABA's membership to allow students to vote, and argued for affordable membership fees. Dick credited Elsie's strong presence with helping to ensure the organization's vitality and its legacy of strong women leaders. Elsie's dogged pursuit of what she believed was right began long before her professorial days. Claire Poulson, a close friend in graduate school, put it this way: "Elsie was a force of nature. Her motto was the proverbial 'lead, follow, or get out of the way!'" And lead she did.

I first met Elsie when I began graduate school in the Department of Human Development at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, in the fall of 1971. Elsie was an advanced doctoral student whose job it was to mentor new student recruits on the parent training research team. With her bright red hair and purple sweatshirt, Elsie welcomed me with open arms as she collated her presentation for the upcoming American Psychological Association convention. Every week for the next 2 years, we met to talk about research and a lot more. As a behavior analyst and therapist, she taught naturally by example, encouraged our fledgling attempts, and shaped our skills without ever making any of us feel less than her best student. Elsie also served as a role model for assertiveness in professional interactions and strategic career planning, prompting us to venture beyond the expected to novel challenges and opportunities. She was a confidence builder and compatriot in planning research to investigate an unexpected finding, challenge a rule that didn't make sense, or confront an ethics quandary. As I got to know her better, though, I realized that Elsie also had a vulnerable side that was prone to bouts of anger and depression. Over time, she shared stories about her life that helped me understand her better.

Elsie grew up poor, as did almost all her classmates in the small Kansas farm town of Altoona. Her childhood friend Ben Meluskey recalls Elsie as an outstanding student in high school amidst some very bright people, although he said their high school was not much of a challenge. He noted that "it was surprising for a class of 17 to produce 10 or more extremely successful careers, but none brighter than Elsie May." Ben's recollections of Elsie mirrored my own in terms of her changeable nature: "Growing up with Elsie was a chore because one never knew which one of her personalities was in control on any given day. She ranged

from quiet and controlled to totally flamboyant. I knew she would grow up to be famous like Dolly or Fanny Brice or a little like Gypsy Rose Lee. And, she sort of did." Elsie might have been quiet at times, but she was rarely passive for long. Ben described Elsie's role vis-a-vis her two best girlfriends growing up: "They led the parade and Elsie led them. Cheerleading, song and dance shows, selling kisses, mocking poor teachers and admiring the good, playing on the softball team, pie auctions, riding the school bus when it stalled on the railroad tracks, playing in the band, always fashionable, and always hiding behind a facade while pondering her next mischief."

Elsie began her freshman year at KU in 1955 but dropped out within a year, married, and lived in Beaumont, Texas, and later Philadelphia. After a few years of taking university courses part-time, educating herself by reading literature, and working, her marriage failed. When her father committed suicide leaving massive debt, Elsie returned to Altoona. She took over the small family farm, raised cattle, and edited the Altoona paper. Elsie and her mother restored the barbed wire fences of their farm together, and Elsie did not leave her mother until the entire debt was paid. In 1967, she returned to KU to complete her undergraduate education, and in 1969, Elsie began graduate school in the Department of Human Development, with Donald M. Baer as her adviser.

Elsie's personal experiences shaped the gifted, colorful, and strong yet sensitive person she became. After I moved to Chicago in 1986, I had the pleasure of sharing many more experiences with her, both professional and personal. We were partners for social outings (Elsie loved a good play and walked out of bad ones), read short stories to each other, commiserated about the challenges and delights of raising dogs in the city, and argued about politics (she always

backed the female candidate). Elsie the matchmaker introduced me to one of her favorite former doctoral students, and many years later, when she was away on sabbatical, he and I fell in love. Elsie the romantic reconnected with her former adviser Don Baer, and in 1990 their long friendship blossomed into love. Elsie and Don celebrated their wedding in professorial style with a symposium on friendship, love, and marriage on Barbara Etzel's deck in Lawrence. For Elsie, it was a choice to embrace life in the present. She began her wedding paper by quoting William Stafford, "The more you let yourself be distracted from where you are going, the more you are the person you are. It is not so much like getting lost as it is like getting found." Elsie and Don shared 12 years with each other, and I believe those were among her happiest.

In 2003, Elsie retired from the University of Chicago and shifted her energies to writing poetry, kayaking, and traveling to faraway places, often on her own. She nurtured friendships with people of all ages and backgrounds, from high brow to low brow, and she flexed her well-honed moral courage into action when she encountered an unfairness she could not abide. Elsie's deep sensitivity and caring for others is reflected in one of her poems, this one written the year after Don's death, to a guide on her visit to Hawaii:

Guidance in Kaua'i  
You must have had enough  
    of my endless queries  
as I try to ease my insecurity  
formulated from trying new things  
    while standing on the edge  
    of inconsolable loss and  
loving our experience together.

I challenge Nature's beauty  
    to soothe my pain,  
    to cradle me with its promise  
and to sprinkle exhaustion that  
comes from challenging her ocean

and brings proud earned sleep  
and your evaluation that,  
“It’s all good.”

And you, with a gentle hand  
that does not touch,  
lead me to simple things as we  
compare our hard-won philosophical  
views  
and still find life puzzling and unfair  
but you say, “It’s all good.” while  
I remain doubtful and say

Loss is loss and “It’s not all good.”

Then you say again,  
“It’s all good.”

I want to hear you say it again,  
“It’s all good.”  
I want to hear you say it again and  
again  
and I want it to be true for you,  
“It’s all good.”  
“It’s all good.”  
“It’s all good.”